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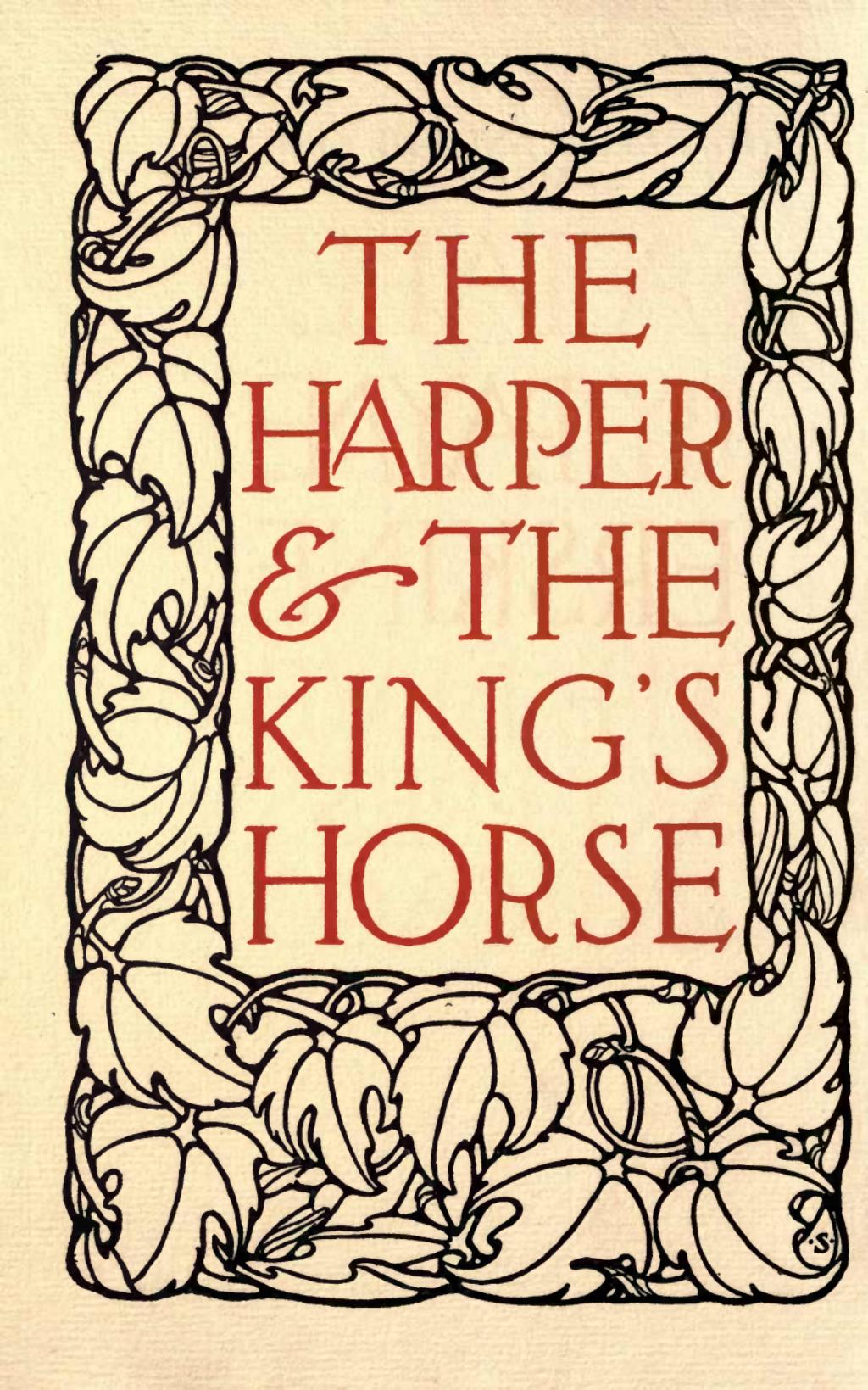


THE HARPER & THE KING'S HORSE

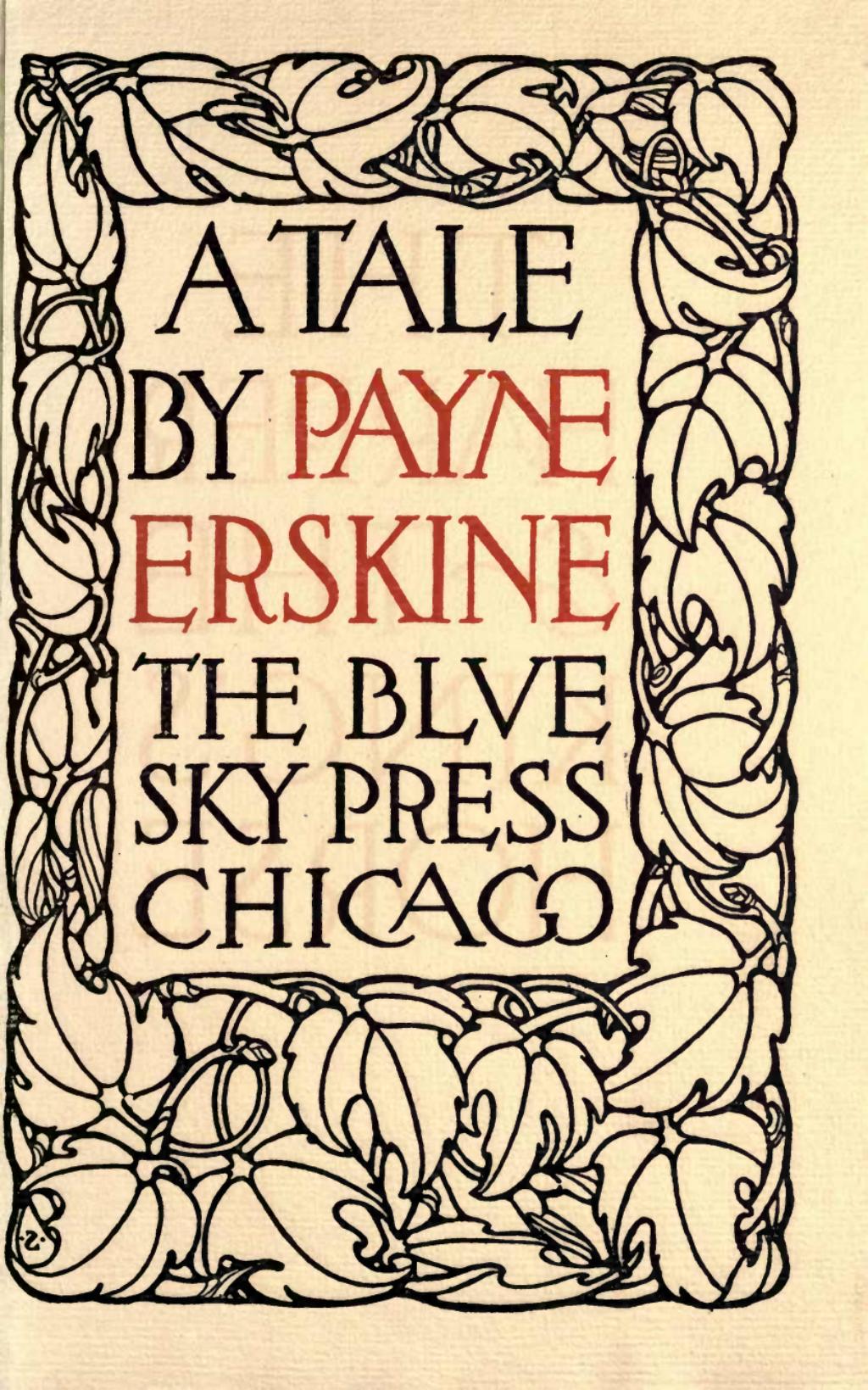


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THE HARPER AND THE KING'S
HORSE



THE
HARPER
& THE
KING'S
HORSE



A TALE
BY PAYNE
ERSKINE
THE BLUE
SKY PRESS
CHICAGO

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CANTO I.
THE KING'S PROMISE

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"Who dares to steal this horse of mine,"

The King's Promise



ONCE long ago,—now
many a year
Hath come and passed
away,—
There lived in Merrie
England dear,
A merrie king who
loved good cheer
And jolly company.
A nodding plume of
the bonnie broom

He wore in his helmet high;
And a goodly horse the good king rode
As ever was by king bestrode.
Quoth he with laughing eye,

“Who dares to steal this horse of mine,
I swear by the broom, a goodly sign,—
And I care not who he be
So he rideth royally—
Who dares to steal this horse,—”quoth he,—
“And lead him forth past guard and groom,
Past locks and bars, from his stall of stone,
And doeth the same to all unknown,
I promise him true by the bonnie broom
He shall forgiven be,
And more, a goodly estate shall win
If he ride him back to me.

The Harper & The King's Horse

“For to mount yon steed I count no sin,
If any man dare,—” quoth the merrie king,—
“But heark ye well,—” quoth he,—
“There hangs a penalty;
Who e'er be caught in the thieving act,—
It mattereth not to me,—
On his bare thief's back shall he be well
thwacked,
And his head shall severed be,
And shall hang in the market place on high,
Where every curious passer by,
Or gaping clown may see.”

Then a shout went round the groaning
board,—
For dined well had he,—
And every courtier slapped his thigh,
And rocked and laughed and winked
his eye,
And said with many an indrawn sigh,
“How merrie the king can be.”

CANTO II.
THE HARPER AND THE HERMIT

—dante's divine comedy—



Alas, high in her father's bower-

The Harper & The Hermit



CROSS the border, in
fair Scotland,
Away from the busy
town,
A harper wandered, harp
in hand,
And sang with head
cast down.

His hair was gold in the
morning sun,

His cheek like the rose was red,
But his heart was sad, and the song he sung
Would have raised the sleeping dead.

The hawk swooped low, the trout leaped
high,

The beasties all drew near,
The hermit telling his beads passed by,
That harper's song to hear.

His voice was clear as the convent bell,—
Sweeter than bird notes shrill,
His harp twanged strong to his wondrous
song,
And rang from hill to hill.

The hermit smiled, for he knew full well
Such song was not in vain,

The Harper & The King's Horse

That it's sad, sweet power, and it's magic
spell,
Were drawn from a soul in pain.

“Come hither harper fair, I pray,
Why sing where none may hear?
The busy town is far away,
Thy purse is light I fear.”

“Why leave the court and merrie jest,
Where fair maids' hearts be won?
What seek ye on the mountain crest,
From morn till set of sun?”

“I sing nor neither gain nor gold,
I sing not for renown.
I better love these cragies bold
Than yonder busy town.

“I sing for love of all sweet things
Beneath the skies above.
Betide me weal, betide me woe,
I sing alone for love.

“A maid dwells in a Scottish tower
More fair than tongue can tell.
I met her in her rosy bower,
In faith I love her well.

The Harper & The Hermit

“I wooed her in her shaded bower,
 This maid of high degree,
Alas!—high in her father’s tower,
 She weeps for love of me.”

The hermit laughed until he shook.
“Beshrew my soul!” cried he,—
“Go wed the lass with bell and book.
 Since so she loveth thee.”

“Nay! Nay! not so!” the harper cried,
 “Such gladness may not be;
Her father is a man of pride
 Who loves not minstrelsie.

“He sweareth loud, with curse and frown,
 Who hath nor gold nor land,
Let him be knight or king or clown,
 He shall not have her hand.”

“Now well a day! and by my troth!
 I’m loth to see thee sad.
Go steal the king’s horse Browne forth,
 Like any honest lad,

“And win the wager of the king
 To get the gold and land,
Then buy a bonnie golden ring,
 And claim the maiden’s hand.”

The Harper & The King's Horse

“Yea! that were well,” the harper cried,
“But if I lose my head,
I lose beside my bonnie bride.
How then shall I be wed?”

The hermit stroked his beard. “I think
I've heard it said,” quoth he,
“A nod is good as any wink
To a horse that cannot see.

“Within a paddock near the town,
There feeds a sleek, roan mare,
And by her side a colt, nut brown,
She loves with mother's care.

“Now I will set a wonder forth
That well may make thee stare.
Go ride the roan to south or north,
Full forty miles from there,—

“Nay fifty, or a hundred, still,—
Her mother love her guide,—
She'll find again that grassy hill,
And the brown colt at her side.

“Now hast thou wit, or hast thou none,
Love speed thee well, I think
Thou'l take a ride, and win a bride,
Let this be nod, or wink.”

The Harper & The Hermit

The harper paused and shook his head,
He shook it once and twice,
Then laughed he long, and laughed
 he loud,
But did not shake it thrice.

“I thank thee well, kind priest,” he cried,
“Both nod and wink I see,
And I will ride and win my bride,
 My maid of high degree.”

CANTO III. THE WAGER



"I' faith, some'er lass, he'll win!"

The Wager



HAT night to busy
Strivling town,
The harper musing, hastened down,
And there that night
he played
For dame and squire, and
capering clown,—
For knight, and blushing
maid.

“Again! again!” with might and main
The listeners cry, “Again the strain,
Good Harper! harp and sing:
Thou singest sweeter than a bird.
Such harping sure was never heard
By courtier or by king
As thine.” Again he twanged the string,
And made the heavy rafters ring
In answer to the song.
Then to Sir Charles, Sir Roger spake,—
A doughty knight and strong,—

“Before such music I could make
On harp or viol, lyre or lute,
I’d sooner steal the king’s horse Browne
Than I’d attempt to do’t.”

The Harper & The King's Horse

“Yeal!” quoth Sir Charles, “to crack a crown,
To wield a sword, or sack a town,
Were easier for me.
I'd sooner ride o'er hill and down,—
Good harper,—on the king's horse Browne,
Than I would harp with thee.”

“Ye speak me fair,” the Harper cried,
While twinkled merrilie
His clear blue eye. “And I will ride
To gay Carlisle, through Strivling town,
Well mounted on the King's horse Browne,
What will ye wager me?”

“Five plows of land,” Sir Roger cried,
“That in Scotland ye may abide
Whene'er it pleaseth thee.”
“Five thousand pounds in good red gold,”
Sir Charles replied, “that thou may'st hold
Wherewith to make merrie.
If thou dost win thou ne'er shall lack
A velvet doublet to thy back
Nor goodly companie.
“Yet have a care!” cried they, “Beware the
penalty.”

“Farewell! Farewell!” the harper cried,
“I take the wager down.
Mayhap e'er next we meet, I ride

The Wager

Like any knight, well set astride
The merrie King's horse Browne."

"Beshrew my heart! I fear he'll do't."
Then spake Sir Charles' dame,
"I would ye had not set him to't
With greater hope of gain."
"Good lack! he'll lose his curly head
If he doth try," a maiden said,
"Pray call him back again."
"Nay! Nay!" Sir Roger cried, "let be!
A canny shrewd head waggeth he.
In faith, sweet lass! he'll win."

CANTO IV.
THE KING'S HUNT



He... gently withdraws the keys.

The King's Hunt



ROM gay Carlisle, one
fair, bright morn,
With noise of whoop,
halloo, and horn,
With baying hounds,
with squire, and knight,
And courtiers gay, and
dames bedight,
With nodding plumes,
and costumes bright,
Of gold, and green, and royal blue,
And copper lustre, crimson hue,
And silver cord and tassels, whew!
A gayer sight ye ne'er shall view
Than when king Harry rode to hunt
On prancing Browne, with fat Sir Blunt
Beside him on a steed of black!
But when at eve they ambled back
Ye should have seen the crowd, good lack!
For all were fagged, and mud bespattered,
And some gay gowns were sadly tattered.
Some lagged behind with sorry pace
As they were losers in the race;
But good King Hal is merrie still,
For did not he the great stag kill?
(Ah, noble deed to quench it's life)
Success rides well, whate'er the strife.

“Up, warder, ho! fling wide the gate.
The king and all his cortege wait.”

The Harper & The King's Horse

The gay king cried, "The steward call.
Sweet dames, be not so sorry all.
Beshrew a pack of frowning jades!
Ride on and seek your tiring maids,
Then meet us in the banquet hall
With sparkling eyes to grace a feast,
Where, look ye, yonder doughty beast
Shall feed ye well in any case,
For leading of ye such a chase."

The servants flew like hens beheaded,
The stag they dressed, the onions shredded,
And fires were built, and cranes were hung,
And roasts and joints, were quickly swung,
With each a boy to baste and turn,
Lest any of the meat should burn.
The cook grew red and hot and flurried
As round his heels the scullions scurried.

At last with much of din and clatter,
The feast was set,
Around the board with merrie chatter
The guests were met.
Upon a huge old brazen platter
Before the king
The antlers of the stag were spread,
With oak leaves green
Bedecked, and dangling ribbons red.
Thus be it seen
How fall the mighty. Thus the pride—

The King's Hunt

The glory of the forest died,
Ignobly severed bone from bone,
To grace a feast; the cook alone
Was praised, who served the gravies hot;
He, and the king who sent the shaft
That laid the mighty monarch low,—
King, against king.

“What, steward, ho!
Why silent is our banquet hall?
Where are the pipes? The fiddlers call!”
Burst forth King Hal. With cringing pace
The steward came. “An’t please your
Grace,

The players all are gone to bed
As drunk as loons,” the steward said.
“They played their pieces out of tune,
And swore the hunt was o’er at noon.”
Enraged King Harry stamped his feet.
“Go turn those players in the street!
‘An’t please my grace! I’ll teach thee, Lout!
To please my grace when I am out.
Thou’st let them at my casks, I see,
And thou shalt pay the penalty.”
But e’er these angry words were spoken,
The silence of the hall was broken.
Without, a strain rose loud and clear.
“The harper of the hills is here,”

Then called aloud
The listening crowd.

The Harper & The King's Horse

“Now that's well said!” exclaimed the king.
“We'll hail him. He shall harp and sing
To help us merrie make withal.”
Then from the balcony King Hal
Called loudly to the harper man,
“Hither good Bard, dost know thy king?
It is our will ye harp and sing
For us, within our banquet hall.
Thy merrie music's all we lack
To give a relish to our sack.”
“Yea Sire,” he doffed his bonnet blue,
“I am your subject, leal and true.
Your will, good sire, and mine are one,
But I have rode since rise of sun.
Behold my good roan hangs her head;
First, I would see her stalled and fed.
The kindly man you'll own, at least,
First shows his kindness to his beast.”

“Well said! Well said!” King Harry cried.
“Go call my grooms! She shall be tied
Within the best stall in my stable
Beside my Browne.” Then back to table
Sped king and guests.

In walked at last
The harper, and his clear eye cast
From end to end of the vast hall;
As with his long arm reaching out
He struck his harp, and forth a rout
Of merrie notes leaped, upward glancing,

The King's Hunt

They filled the hall, and gaily dancing
Dissolved in melodies entrancing;
Then softer echoes sighed and trembled,
Among the listening guests assembled.
Ah! well he played, that harper man.
He sang the sorrows of his clan,
Of Scotland's woe and dire disaster,
Of England's glory and her Master.
Then, as his notes flew fast and faster,
Of war, of pleasure and of love,
Then of the chase, then loud above
The sound of voices and of laughter,
With mountain thunders shook each rafter;
Then dropping to a smoother measure,
He still played on, at his own pleasure,
Till, striking low, soft, slumberous chords,
He slowly played. The drunken lords
Grew drowsy, and the monarch's head
Began to nod, and to his bed
Each guest retired as he was able,
While some lay sprawled beneath the table.
Then in the servants came in hordes,
From cook to grooms of the king's stable—
Devoured the feast and cleared the boards,
And drank the wine as they were lords.
Alas! Alas! for human kind,
They drank till they were deaf and blind.
The harper smiled and played and waited
Until the last drunk loon, belated,
With limp limbs hanging, snored aloud.

The Harper & The King's Horse

Ignoring then the motly crowd
He from the girdle of the groom
Deftly withdrew the keys,—the room,
 He quitted,
And in the great lock of the stable
 The great keys fitted.

Within the darkness black as sable
Stood Browne, the lordly horse, and there,
Fast by his side the sleek roan mare.
He bridled them and saddled them,
And tied their reins together,
And on the highway started them
With neither bar nor tether.

“Now go your way!” the harper cried
As off they galloped side by side.

“Now go your way my gentle roan.

I wot you 'll not soon parted be,
So both will have good companie.

For me, I 'll in and lay me down,
For sleep is sweet to king or clown.”

But first he locked the stable door
And placed, as they had been before,
Within the dull groom's girdle brown
The ponderous keys: “ ‘Tis well,” quoth he
“That since the good king's horse is gone
The door should fastened be.”

CANTO V.
THE SEARCH



Thou'rt a knave of good spirit,

The Search



N merrie Carlisle, at the court of the King,
Had happened a wonderful, marvelous thing.

You never did see what a tumult was there.
The grooms were all running and tearing their hair.

They searched all the stables, through yard, loft and stair,
In highways, in byways, in paddock and lane
They blustered and shouted and hunted in vain.

The servants all scurried as they were insane,
Each housemaid or scullion, groom, cook or valet,
For why? the King's horse had been stolen away.

'Twas an uncanny trick, and it savored of magic,
'Twould be sure in the sequel to prove something tragic,
For there hung the keys at the side of the groom,
Each marked with the sign of the helmet and broom.

The Harper & The King's Horse

As wan as a ghost just out of his tomb
He shivered and shook, and declared
 'twas a witch,
A sprite or magician, he couldn't tell which,
Else how could the horse through the key-
 hole be drawn;
For, with no other opening, this must be
 the case,
As plain to be seen as the nose on your face.
Spite of locks, bars and bolts, the king's
 horse was gone.

At last the king rose
And put on his clothes,
And bathed his red eyes
And his cherry red nose.
With a frown on his brow
He drank his "red sherry,"
For even a monarch
Can't always "be merry."
He was moody and cross,
And he called for his horse
(His breakfast they brought
 As a matter of course).

The servants all shook with a terrible awe
When a frown on the brow of King Harry
 they saw.
They said without doubt that the groom
 would be hung,

The Search

That they all would be beaten or have
their necks wrung,

Or be ordered away
With no farthing of pay.
Alas! and alack!
What a terrible day!

So gathered together in knot and in ring,
They beckoned and whispered, "this
terrible thing!"

Oh, what man among them would dare
tell the king?"

When just at this juncture the harper
appeared,

It was marvelous then how fast the sky
cleared.

With his keen ready wit and sunshiny face,
For to break the ill news just the man
for the place.

So close at his heels, like a parcel of eels,
Or school of red herring the fisherman
deals,

They followed the harper, and straight
to the king

He led the procession the story to bring.

Now all in the dead of the darksome night,
When dread spirits roam in a sulphurous
light,

The Harper & The King's Horse

When gray warlocks dance and witch
fires burn low,
Some rogue of a thief had entered, and lo!
The king's horse was gone and the sleek
roan also.
Then loud the king spake, till the cour-
tiers all quailed,
He swore at the grooms, at the servants
he railed,
He thundered his orders till breath and
words failed.
"Nay Sire," quoth the harper, "this
trouble is mine,
Since every good steed in the country
is thine,
And all the green pastures from here to
Landsend;
Hence if he be found, more the matter
to mend,
He'll be found, it is plain,
On thine own fair domain,
While for me I may ne'er see
my good roan again."

Then down on his knees the bold harper
man fell,
And besought for the grooms and the
servants right well
Of the king clemency.
"I have heard said" quoth he,

The Search

“That the wisdom of fools may confound
the great;
Hence, though little my wit and empty
my pate,
Call back all the searchers and give me, I ask,
Sole charge for three days of this
sorrowful task.

With my harp in my hand
I will go through the land,
For none will suspect a poor innocent
harper
Of mingling with music the tricks of a
sharper.

“Thou’rt a knave of good spirit, and now
by St. Biddle,
I give three days for the solving this riddle,
And if on the third day at six by the dial
Thou dost not appear, I will have up
for trial
These clowns, everyone, and if, by St. Rose,
On the fourth thou’rt not here, like a
parcel of crows
They shall hang in the market e’er evening
shall close.”
Thus answered the king, and the harper
with speed
Set forth on his search for the merrie
king’s steed.

CANTO VI.

THE RETURN AND THE REWARD



"O, not for the gold nor the land my king
Have I risked my life," he cried.

The Return & The Reward



H, sweet was the breath
of the morning,
And blythe were
the bird notes
shril,
And light was the heart
of the harper man
As he trudged
over moorland
and hill.

For he thought of the lass in the Scottish
tower,—

And he thought of the tryst in the maiden's
bower,—

He thought of Sir Charles and the
promised gold,—

And Sir Roger's gift of a Scottish hold,—
All these, and the prize of the king beside—
And the golden ring which should bind
his bride,—

And he hastened his steps toward Striv-
ling towne

For to win them all with the king's horse
Browne.

Lo! there, as he neared the paddock gate,
He saw the hermit stand and wait,
Soberly clad in cowl and hood,
Telling his beads as good priest should;
And, lo! in the paddock the steeds
all three,

The Harper & The King's Horse

The roan and the colt and the horse.

“Pardee!

For to help my fellow I count no sin,”
Quoth the priest as he solemnly fastened
them in.

The harper bowed low as the priest
passed by,

And blessed the good man, with a tear
in his eye.

Then hastily mounting the king's horse
Browne,

He galloped away into Strivling towne.
There sate Sir Charles and Sir Roger bold;
One gave him the land, one paid him
the gold.

Right willingly paid they their wagers
down,

When they saw him gallop through
Strivling towne.

Then hied he straight to the Scottish tower,
And kept his tryst in the maiden's bower.
There touched he the harp strings, low
and sweet,

And the sound gave wings to the maiden's
feet.

“Now lass, don your mantle, and soft
snood of grey,

The Return & The Reward

And gather your kirtle. We 'll mount
and away.
Now Browne, goodly steed, be ye steady
and fleet,
For never before bore ye burden so sweet.
I wot ne'er before bore ye burden so fair
As my white rose, my lass, with her long
braids of hair."

O sweet was the breath of the evening wind
And clear was the western sky,
And bright were the stars, as they leaped
in sight,
And pale was the moon on high,
And glad was the heart of the harper man
As he called at the palace gate,
"Up! Warder ho! Fling the portals wide!
Will ye have the king's horse wait outside?
Will ye have the king's horse wait?"

Then loud was the shout in the courts
below,
And loud in the palace hall,
And glad was the heart of the merrie king
When he heard the harper call.
O! the heart of the harper beat high
and fast
As he kneeled at the feet of the king at last,
And pale was the face of the gentle
maid

The Harper & The King's Horse

As she listened the words which the
harper said.

“Nay! not for the gold, nor the land, my
king,
Have I risked my life,” he cried,
“But to wed this lass, with a golden ring,
Who standeth here at my side.
For love of the light in her blue, blue eyes
Would I win the estate, thy promised prize.
For the smile on her lips, and the touch
of her hand,
I kneel at thy feet and beg the land.
I stole the horse like a very thief,
I rode him back like a lord,
And now I ask that thou, like a king,
Redeem thy promised word.”

“Thou’rt a doughty knave,
And thy heart is brave!”
Cried the king, with a burst of laughter,—
“And thus with my sword
I create thee a lord—
Sir Harper, forever after;
And thine the estate forever shall be,
For well hast thou won it, i’ faith,”
cried he.
So there was a feast at the court of the king,
And the Harper and Lassie were wed
with a ring.

Here endeth The Harper and The King's
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